

Waiver Plan Generates Relief, Fret

Details to Come on Ways NCLB Rules Would Bend

By Alyson Klein
& Michele McNeil

While the Obama administration's plan to offer states relief from parts of the No Child Left Behind Act—if they agree to embrace unspecified education redesign priorities—has drawn kudos from some quarters, it isn't sitting well in others.

Officials in a number of states have praised the idea as an opportunity for badly needed relief from what they see as unrealistic and punitive requirements of the federal law. But other states, including Montana and Washington, are skeptical of the plan, especially of the strings that will be attached. And some organizations and policy leaders—from the National Education Association to former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings—have expressed outright opposition to such conditional waivers.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan argues that waivers are necessary, since renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, whose current version is the NCLB law, has been languishing in Congress. The administration has not

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FOCUS ON: CHARTERS

Charter Operators Spell Out Barriers To 'Scaling Up'

By Mary Ann Zehr

The pace at which the highest-performing charter-management organizations are "scaling up" is being determined largely by how rapidly they can develop and hire strong leaders and acquire physical space, and by the level of support they receive for growth from city or state policies, say leaders from some charter organizations viewed by advocates as having high student achievement.

To explore what might be obstacles to growth for successful charter operators, *Education Week* interviewed leaders of five of the seven charter-management organizations, or CMOs, in the NewSchools Venture Fund's portfolio that the fund sees as producing the best student-achievement results.

The seven charter operators are: Aspire Public Schools, Achievement First,

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Members of the East Juniata High School field hockey team practice last week. The 3,100-student Juniata district, in central Pennsylvania, has started charging student-athletes \$250 per sport to participate this year to help offset budget cuts.

Sean Simmers for Education Week

Districts Face Painful Cuts as School Year Begins

By Sean Cavanagh

The academic motto of the McKeesport Area School District is "move, engage, and assess." But this fall, district leaders will start the school year with an additional goal in mind: to persevere.

The 3,900-student district, located in western Pennsylvania, has seen its budget shrink this year, partly as a result of reductions in state aid, which in turn reflect the drying-up

of federal stimulus dollars. School leaders have responded by taking several cost-cutting steps, including eliminating 35 teaching positions, cutting more than 20 classroom tutors, reducing coaching of teachers, and trimming the support staff, such as custodians and secretaries.

As students around the country begin the 2011-12 school year, many of them will be returning to districts that, like McKeesport, have been forced to restructure their operations

in the face of budget cuts. Leaders of those school systems have sought to avoid cuts that they believe would weaken instruction. But they also believe the reductions will put a strain on schools and the people who work in them, and they worry that the pain will last for several years, given shaky economic conditions and the improbability of increases in state aid.

McKeesport is "a resilient district,"

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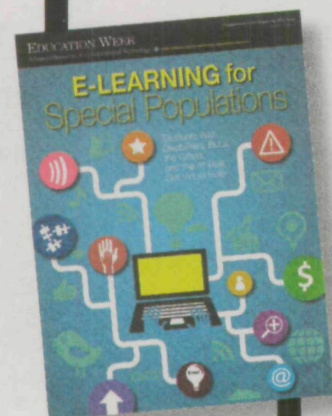
With stimulus funds evaporating and states reducing education aid, districts are struggling to do more with less

E-Learning for Special Populations

This *Education Week* special report examines the expanding virtual learning opportunities for

students with disabilities, English-language learners, gifted and talented students, and those at risk of failing in school. It also addresses the barriers that exist for greater participation in online education for these groups of students.

See the pullout section opposite Page 24.



Simulations Help School Leaders Practice 'Tough Conversations'

By Sarah D. Sparks
Syracuse, N.Y.

Jody F. Manning has been a superintendent in New York state for more than 20 years, but his experience didn't make his conversation with the woman across the table any easier.

"Terry Jones" had made three increasingly urgent phone calls asking to meet about her daughter, whose grades have been dropping precipitously. Ms. Jones talked about her daughter's bruises and clothes found ripped—bullying the girl has mentioned in passing but won't talk about directly—and said she suspects the

girl has been cutting herself. When Mr. Manning talked about the high school's anti-bullying policy and suggested ways to find the bullies and stop them, Ms. Jones became increasingly upset and adamant that the school not involve her daughter in any way in the bullies' punishment.

And then she dropped a potential legal bombshell: Ms. Jones is a lesbian, raising her daughter with another woman, and she feared her daughter's bullying may be a hate crime.

This is the sort of meeting, wedged among dozens of other daily fires, that could easily blow up in a school admin-

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Trained Medical Actors Helping School Leaders Hone People Skills

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istrator's face. It won't, in this case, as Mr. Manning is among nine other school leaders meeting with "Terry Jones" as part of a simulation training program for school leaders at Syracuse University.

The research project here between Benjamin H. Dotger, an assistant professor of teaching and leadership at Syracuse, and the State University of New York's Upstate Clinical Skills Center takes a page from the traditional "standardized patients" used to simulate disease symptoms for medical students. The project is creating a series of parent, teacher, student, and community-member roles to help principals and teachers learn how to handle tricky conversations.

Supported by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, the project has developed 15 principal and 13 teacher simulations and is rolling out a school leadership-training curriculum based on them this fall.

Initial research on the live simulations found participants improved significantly in their awareness of and responsiveness to different races and cultures, and slightly improved their moral and ethical judgment after going through the simulations as gauged on standardized measures.

Beyond Role Playing

Mr. Manning, the superintendent of the 1,500-student Solvay Union Free School District in New York, has taken part in 13 such simulations. He calls the experience a "scrimmage" for school leadership.

Social interaction "is something we aren't trained on," he said. Preservice programs "take care of the pedagogy, take care of classroom management, but they never teach how to deal with parents."

"When I started as an assistant principal, everything I learned was on the job, and there are times where, reflecting on them, there are things I would have done differently," he added, "and I've seen first-year [staff members] just fall apart and almost lose their career over a bad parent conference, where they just can't deal with it."

At a time of increasing principal turnover and high-stakes school accountability, more school leadership programs are evolving beyond traditional role-playing lessons to more-dynamic simulations.

"Often in higher education they talk about principal preparation, while folks in school districts talk about principal readiness, and there is a real gap between preparation and readiness," said Richard A. Flanary, the senior director for leadership programs and services for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, in Reston, Va.

"For many principals, their clinical experience"—the administrator-candidates' practice in a

school—"was the most valuable of their program, but often those were done in episodic, piecemeal experiences," Mr. Flanary said. "We're beginning to see more and more programs using simulations so that they don't leave those kinds of experiences with parents and teachers and board members until the end of the program."

'Standardized' Experience

Much of the recent research on professional-development simulations has focused on computer simulations, such as the University of Central Florida's TeachME project, in which preservice teachers instruct a classroom full of virtual students projected onto a screen. Little emphasis, though, has been given to live simulations for school leaders, who must interact regularly not only with students, but also with parents, teachers, school board members, and community officials.

To help school leaders develop diplomatic skills and hone their

“You have to get used to sitting in front of human beings and having these tough conversations if you want to be in this profession for long.”

BENJAMIN H. DOTGER

Syracuse University

judgment, Mr. Dotger, the lead researcher for the Syracuse program, looked to the live-action simulations already used in nearly all medical schools to train would-be doctors to interview patients and diagnose symptoms.

"The entrepreneurial part of me recognizes the value" of using virtual avatars instead of trained actors, Mr. Dotger said. "At the end of the day, though, I am preparing teachers and school leaders for what is still a career that requires dealing with people. I'm not convinced that sitting in front of a computer screen dealing with an angry parent is going to produce the same visceral experience as dealing with an angry parent in person."

Mr. Dotger and his team interviewed 52 principals about regular issues in their daily practice, including their most difficult conversations with students, parents, and teachers and examples of situations they thought they had resolved well or poorly. The researchers then analyzed the interviews for common problems and themes, particularly those

which the school leaders thought a new principal might not have dealt with during training, and developed characters that could be used to illustrate the issues.

For example, "one of the things principals repeatedly told us was, you have to be patient," Mr. Dotger said. "If you are too quick to give a student a lunch detention and get him out of your office so you can get to other stuff, you may miss the chance to really help that kid."

That issue inspired the character "Shannon Casey," who lands in the principal's office of a large urban school after threatening to beat up two students on the bus.

The actors who play Shannon Casey are trained to be nonresponsive, avoiding questions until the principal has probed three separate times, and then gradually revealing the information that the girl's mother is in prison and Shannon has been caring for a younger sister—information that the school had not known.

"For a novice principal, or a very busy principal, that is just an issue of, 'Don't get in a fight. You know you shouldn't use that language,' and you slap a lunch detention on it and get her out," Mr. Dotger said. "The experienced principal, the one worth her salt, is going to dig into this a little and find out what's going on."

Yet, "sometimes, it never comes out," noted Steven Harris, the director of the clinical-skills center. "In a group of 40 [leadership] students, no one will ask the right questions to have the information come out."

Getting Into Character

It takes about 20 hours to develop and refine each simulation, and another three to seven hours to train several actors—borrowed, in fact, from the SUNY Clinical Skills Center's medical-training pool—to become a "Shannon Casey" or a "Terry Jones." They learn not just scripts and trigger responses, but mannerisms, background, and even the level and type of emotion to display in response to different lines of conversation.

An actor playing an abused spouse may have a half-healed bruise applied, while one intended to appear intoxicated will be asked to gargle with beer and have a bit splashed on his clothes. The simulation actors are also trained in what to look for to provide feedback on each principal's performance.

A leadership student goes into each simulation with a minimum of information, sometimes including a student's file but often just a note from the secretary. A session may ask a principal to deal with, among other situations: a top-performing student who has been caught with drugs and is obviously coming off a high; one parent angry over the inclusion of sex education in the curriculum, and another worried over his daughter's moodiness; and a veteran teacher with more experience than

Practicing the 'Tough Conversations'

Syracuse University researcher Benjamin H. Dotger, working in conjunction with the State University of New York's Upstate Clinical Skills Center, has developed more than two dozen simulations to help principals and other school leaders sharpen their diplomatic and decisionmaking skills. The practice scenarios include:

- A traditional screening interview with a teacher-candidate.
- A conversation with parents of "Sam Ormon," a student seeking to re-enter school following a drug-related suspension, including one version in which Sam's father reeks of alcohol himself.
- A meeting with a parent who asks that his daughter not be exposed to district-approved lessons on human reproduction and who berates administrators for implementing such curricula with "impressionable youth."
- A meeting in which the principal must act as a referee between a first-year teacher and a parent who is angry about the teacher's grading policy.
- A talk with a football and baseball coach who is very successful on the field but mediocre in the classroom.
- A meeting in which a principal learns that school staff may have inappropriately restrained a student with autism during a verbal misunderstanding.

SOURCE: Benjamin H. Dotger

the principal who has gotten a bad performance review.

Participants tackle four simulations back to back to mirror a real meeting schedule.

"One that sticks out in my mind was, there was a very irate parent that leaves yelling, slamming the door and saying, 'I'm going to call the superintendent,'" recalled Mr. Manning, the Solvay superintendent. "You have to be able to feel that sense of failure and figure out where you go on from there. You have this parent who leaves yelling and screaming, and your blood pressure is up, but then you have to go into your office immediately after with a student in a very sensitive situation, and you have to deal with that."

Lessons Learned

After the class goes through a round of simulations, each member is given a copy of his or her video and has a week to select a one-minute clip from each session; the clips can show a success, a failure, or just an interaction the student wants to discuss. At the next class, each member presents his or her clip, and the class discusses how different approaches to the situation worked.

Even for experienced administrators, the review session often turns up surprises. Back in his session with the fictional Ms. Jones, Mr. Manning was able to calm the mother's concern about her daughter's bullying with a plan to use the school's video cameras to document abuse and confront the bullies. Yet he barely addressed the high school student's self-cutting, an issue that raised red flags among 10 administrators who went through the "Terry Jones" simulation with Mr. Manning.

One principal called the behavior "suicidal" and said he would have pulled Ms. Jones' daughter off the

school bus and referred her for mental-health services immediately. Another admitted, "I never even thought about it," during the session, prompting a discussion among the administrators about how to tell normal teenage angst from true signs of depression—and a school's potential liability if an administrator makes the wrong call.

"We deal with cutting so often that it seems to have softened the alarm bells that should come up," a third administrator said.

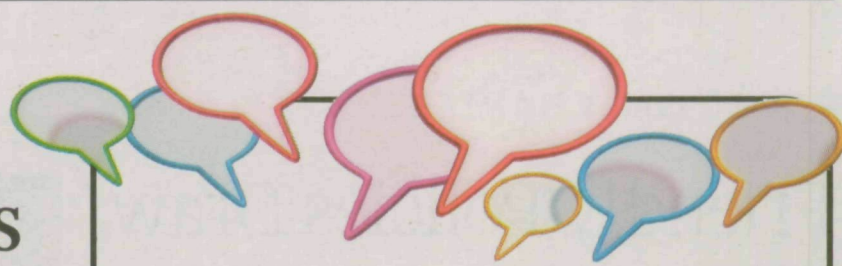
Mr. Manning last year asked all of his first-year teachers and half the district's school leadership teams to take part in the program.

Though live simulations have become the norm in medical schools, it remains to be seen how widespread they will be in training educators and school leaders. The Syracuse program costs about \$10,000 per year for more than 100 students; Mr. Dotger said it costs \$150 to \$200 to put one student-teacher or -leader through a set of four simulations, but costs come down for larger groups. While he borrows trained actors from the medical school, Mr. Dotger said districts could as easily recruit from a community theater group or college drama students. What matters, he said, is giving school teachers and leaders the chance to respond to real people.

"You have to get used to sitting in front of human beings and having these tough conversations if you want to be in this profession for long," he said.

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Links to the studies in this article are provided at edweek.org/links.



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